

Herbert J. Cooper

Indigenous Principles
in Nigeria

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INDIGENOUS PRINCIPLES IN NIGERIA

(Reprinted from *World Dominion*)

BY
HERBERT J. COOPER

WORLD DOMINION PRESS

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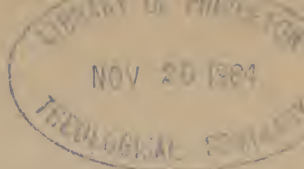


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Key to a Hitherto Insoluble Problem

“ON a tour of itineration”—said a missionary who visited the WORLD DOMINION offices some time ago—“we came to a very large pagan village, and, after some time spent with the chief and some of the people, we were asked to send a teacher. Alas! we replied, we have no one to send. A year afterwards we visited the same village and found that it had become completely Mohammedan. Between our first visit and our second a Moslem trader had come, and this was the result.”

This story epitomises a problem which has been stated over and over again, but few seem to see that the problem thus stated suggests the solution. Why should Christian natives not do for Christianity what the Moslem trader did for Mohammedanism?

The following article by the Rev. H. J. Cooper, of the Sudan United Mission, has a distinct bearing upon this question, and has been reprinted as a contribution to the Indigenous Church Series.

Indigenous Principles in Practice in Nigeria

HERBERT J. COOPER

“The king’s business requireth haste.”

“Let all things be done decently and in order.”

THE King’s business is indeed urgent, but that is no reason for using wrong methods in a foolish endeavour to gain some seemingly temporary advantage. Our great commission is to “Go” . . . “Tell” . . . “Preach”—but we must have some understanding of the people to whom we go, also of their language and mode of thought, as well as a true knowledge of the Message we have to proclaim. The people to whom we are sent may have very little use for us or the Gospel, but if the Message is presented in such a way as to make them feel that it is of the utmost importance to them and of real service in their daily life, there is some hope that they may have their curiosity aroused and thus prejudice may be overcome and a hearing obtained—trusting the Holy Spirit to lead them into the truth.

As soon as enquirers are enrolled they need careful instruction, and much of the future of the work depends on the methods used. These early converts present possibilities of reaching many more, for it is only natural that the people will more readily listen to their own tribesmen who talk as they talk, live as they live and think as they think. It is indeed very tempting to take the most promising of the first converts and pay them from foreign money to preach the Gospel to their kith and kin. It seems right and expedient so to do, for does not the King’s business require haste? And European workers are so few and cannot the native best reach his own people? “Africa must be evangelized by the African” is the slogan, and friends at home are quite willing to support native evangelists. This sounds logical and feasible, and may appear to be the surest and most expeditious way to set to work, but the

shortest way is not always the best, and in a new work it is absolutely essential that the foundations be secure.

These and other problems confronted us when we took up pioneer work in Nigeria. Again and again we were thrown upon God and sought His guidance. We wanted the very best methods for His work, but we realized also that without the abiding presence of the Master and the continual witness of the Spirit even the best methods would not avail. We cannot claim any special ability or boast of great attainments, but would tell how two of His servants were led in their endeavour to extend His Kingdom in the Sudan, by simple dependence upon Him, by meditating on His Word and studying the experience of others in similar spheres.

The people to whom we were sent are known as Yergum, or as they call themselves, Taroh. Before they came under British rule in 1903, they kept very much to their hill fastnesses in the Murchison range of the Plateau Province, Northern Nigeria, farming, hunting and defending themselves from Moslem raiders. They also did some raiding on their own account, thus helping to satisfy their lust for plunder and their desire for human flesh. It was still "Unsettled Territory" when the Sudan United Mission entered the district in 1907, and special permits had to be obtained before we could reside amongst these wild folk. Repeatedly we have heard the war whistle calling men to arms, and have helped sew up the wounded of the opposing forces.

We sought in various ways to make Christ known, and found that constant visitation was one of the best means of getting to know them. At first the women and children ran screaming as they saw us approach, and the men would scarcely deign to answer our greeting. They did not wish for any outside interference, and endeavoured to keep us in the dark regarding their manners, customs and religious practices. We set ourselves the task of reducing their language to writing, and they attempted to poison the man who assisted us. They were quite content to continue as their fathers had done, farming during the wet season,

hunting and raiding during the dry season, dancing on moonlight nights and performing their fetish rites in their homes and sacred hills.

Owing to shortage of staff the Station (Langtang) had to be closed for over two years, but it was re-opened in 1912. This closing had a bad effect on the work, for the natives conceived the idea that the missionaries were only as birds of passage, and so why should they heed our strange teaching. But God was working silently by His Spirit, while we endeavoured to proclaim the Gospel in season and out of season, Sunday and week-day, in Church and compound, throughout the plains and in the hills. He was also leading us to see that the teaching of Jesus must have an African setting if it was to appeal to the sons of Africa. We studied afresh the methods of the Master and His servant Paul, and sought to relate the Message of the Gospel to the daily life of the people. We endeavoured to think things out from their viewpoint, always respecting their ideas, remembering that we were guests in a foreign land, and that we had much to learn from these primitive folk, for "East is East," and they viewed most things from a different standpoint to the West. Very few came to the services on the Mission compound, and scarcely any attended school with regularity. A number came for medical treatment, and this gave us many opportunities to demonstrate the love of Christ. Meanwhile books were being prepared and itinerating tours made.

God was leading us into contact with men whom He had chosen as His instruments. One young man, a Yergum, who was employed on the Mission compound, had some years previous to our arrival joined himself to a Mohammedan trader and learned the Hausa language, the *lingua franca* of Northern Nigeria. He was one of the first to profess faith in Christ, and proved a valuable interpreter and helper in language work. While visiting in the homes of his people, he became friendly with a very intelligent pagan before whom he set the claims of Christianity. After due consideration this man publicly burned his idols and became a keen seeker after truth. Immediately

he was subjected to the wrath of his fellow-tribesmen. At first they tried to frighten him, threatening violence if he did not recant. His wives left him, fearing that some evil would befall the home now that the householder no longer performed the fetish rites. For a long time he had to stand alone, but through all he fearlessly preached his new-found faith in His Saviour. Others were won, and in due course the building which had served as School-Church had to be enlarged to accommodate all who were coming to the Sunday services. Some of the congregation were walking distances varying from two to seventeen miles each week, and most of them were very regular in attendance.

In 1919, after some years of instruction, two men of outstanding Christian character were baptized. They had done valiant service and stood firm amidst much persecution. In December, 1922, when nineteen had been baptized, we gathered them together, drew up the Covenant which all signed, and thus formed the local Church. What a solemn time it was as we partook of the Lord's Supper—men and women drawn from various sections of the tribe, who a few years previous had been in contending camps in inter-tribal warfare, now sitting together owning allegiance to the one Lord and united in His name !

While engaged in instructing these early converts, we soon found that we were confronted by many problems which our limited experience as a young Mission had not prepared us to solve. We were much exercised and studied more closely the records of the early Apostolic Church, especially the methods of that Master Builder, the Apostle Paul.

It had been our ideal through the years so to labour as to make ourselves not indispensable, but as dispensable as possible ; so that should we be removed, we should leave behind a body of Christians who could, if necessary, carry on their own work. Our aim was to plant an indigenous Church, which should be self-governing, self-extending, and self-supporting from the very beginning ; able to propagate itself freely by the procreative power of the Holy Ghost. With this end in view we urged upon the

Christians that they were saved to serve. Knowing Christ, it was their duty to make Him known and win their own people for Him. The work was their work and not ours, and they must accept responsibility for the carrying of it on and the growth of it.

The idea of SELF-GOVERNMENT in the Church was not altogether new to them. We had precedent to go upon, for in their tribal life they have their chiefs and elders and some form of self-government. They were forming, not a new clan in the tribe, but a company of believers whose business it was to share their new-found joy with their fellow-tribesmen. This company was not a European organization, but native. They were Yergums of the Yergum. They were followers of Jesus, and as such must be holy, and His standard must be their standard. As soon as the first enquirers had been accepted, others were enrolled only after consultation with one or more of the senior Christians. Therefore, when the Church was formed, there were men already serving in the capacity of elders, who were then formally elected. All matters affecting the local Church are discussed first with the elders, and then, on their recommendation, are brought before the Church, and only carried when approved by a large majority. The subject discussed is then ready to be announced to the whole congregation. Thus new regulations are introduced, and, having the endorsement of the Church, they carry weight. All cases of discipline are referred to the elders and any of sufficient gravity are brought before the whole Church. The members are impressed by the fact that it is *their* Church, and it is *their* business to keep it pure.

This has meant much time spent patiently reasoning and teaching. Often it would have been much easier to issue definite orders, but we felt that, if self-government was to become a reality, it must be introduced from the beginning and the infant Church led along these lines.

By adhering closely to these principles of self-government, we were able to develop the idea of SELF-SUPPORT. In connection with their heathen rites many of these

natives were compelled to pay heavily. It was impressed upon the Christians that as they had been freed from the tyranny of fear, they should give out of love to their Saviour at least as much to the support of His work as they gave in connection with their fetish practices. Tithing was taught, and some of the Christians have given very liberally. When the harvest of guinea corn and other crops is reaped, the Lord's portion is brought in. There was also the collection each Sunday as part of worship. In the early days of the work very few of the Christians had money to contribute; so they brought from their stores offerings of produce—millet, ground-nuts, eggs and sometimes a fowl, our kitchen tray being utilized as a collecting-plate. Later when a market was established and the people learned something of the value of money, more coin was given. It was then proposed that we adopt the Weekly Freewill Offering system. The elders took long to consider this new step, but eventually they recommended it to the Church and then to the congregation. But the real test came when the promissory notes were distributed, and we were agreeably surprised when over a hundred and thirty were handed in. Some from their poverty could only promise a halfpenny per week, while others undertook to give threepence, and also guaranteed offerings from other members of their household. Most of these have given with unfailing regularity, and to some it has meant great sacrifice—the weekly penny often being their last.

It has always been the rule that they must purchase their own books and school materials. There are now six books in the Yergum language. The British and Foreign Bible Society printed St. Mark's Gospel in 1917, and the Religious Tract Society published three books the same year. Since then the Church has, when forwarding results of book sales, voted donations to these Societies. Later two books were printed in Nigeria. The Christians paid the entire cost and set the selling price, the money from sales going back into the Church funds. They have also built a large Church at the central station, purchasing timber, bolts and all materials which could not be procured

locally. The original building still serves as a school, and is kept in repair by the Christians. They also laid out and keep in order their own burying-ground, and have given their services in clearing portions of the Mission compound and carrying loads gratis on some of our itinerating tours. They have built voluntarily meeting-huts in the villages where they gather daily at sunrise and sunset for worship, also huts for the visiting missionary. At one of the out-stations where the work has been very fruitful during recent years a new Church was needed ; this they have erected at their own cost. All evangelistic work is voluntary service.

The principle is that the local Church must maintain its own work. When they want whole-time native teachers or pastors who need support, they, not the European, must pay them. The Church will then settle its own terms with the worker, who in turn will be responsible to the Church.

These principles must be laid down from the very earliest stages of the work, and must be steadily adhered to. So much depends on precedent. If the system of paying agents from foreign funds be adopted at the beginning, it will be with the utmost difficulty that it can be altered at a later stage. Once the average native accepts any payment from the foreigner, who he considers has an unlimited supply of cash, he agitates for more and often leaves Mission employ for higher paid service. Whereas our experience has been during these years that not one of these self-supporting workers has left and not one has been suspended. We believe that this is the most satisfactory policy if one wishes to develop a truly indigenous Church, and the one which will eventually be the most fruitful in establishing Christianity in Africa.

SELF-EXTENSION has been one of the outstanding features of the Langtang Church. The Christians go out preaching on Sunday afternoons and during the week as their work permits. Some years ago an "every compound campaign" was suggested to them. This they organized, and for one week each dry season they go in small companies

throughout the whole district carrying the Gospel, not only to the entire Yergum, but also to the adjoining tribes with encouraging results. Twenty Sunday-school teachers are rendering faithful service each Lord's Day. In some of the Yergum villages little Christian communities have been established. These gather daily for worship and instruction, and the man most suitable in each centre is chosen as leader. He gives his services freely, supporting himself like his neighbours by farming. "Let every man abide wherein he is called" is an Apostolic injunction. There are now nine of these self-supporting out-centres in the Yergum district, and the missionary at the central station visits them as frequently as possible, instructing the Christians and encouraging them to greater efforts. These out-centres are truly indigenous, and have a marked influence on the whole district. Some of the strongest and most reliable of the Christians are found in these villages far removed from the Mission station. All are expected, unless hindered by infirmity or age, to attend the Sunday services and classes at the central station, and many heathen go to the services in these village centres, and are won for Christ as the direct result of the efforts of these outpost teachers. Some go in order to learn to read, and as the desire for education is spreading, these village schools will have an ever-growing influence throughout the neighbourhood.

While the work amongst the Yergum was in its early developments, we were led to make tours into adjoining tribes. We found that Islamic influence had already made itself evident in some of the tribes to the east of Langtang. There were Mohammedan praying-places in many of the villages, and some Moslem schools right in the midst of pagan populations. The moral and physical conditions of the people were worse than those of the Yergum. The situation was indeed urgent, but there was no European missionary available. On these itinerating tours we were accompanied by Yergum Christian carriers who did much propaganda work.

Bordering the Yergum on the east are the Burumawa

or Bokiyûm. The needs of these people were laid before the newly formed Langtang Church, and we asked for volunteers. To our surprise and great joy one of our former pupils offered. While serving as house-boy, we had overheard him relating to the other boys his gruesome experience at a cannibal feast. Under the influence of the Christian home, he decided to yield himself to God. Later he made his own farm and married one of the finest Christian women in the congregation. They were both Sunday-school teachers and earnest Christian workers. The elders, then the whole Church, considered and accepted the offer, and in 1923 they went forth as the first missionaries of the Langtang Church—self-supporting workers. Later, when further help was needed, one of the Yergum out-centre teachers offered, and, together with his wife, went to the same tribe. They also support themselves by farming and devote their spare time to evangelistic work.

Beyond these Bokiyûm in a north-easterly direction is another tribe, the Jari, which we visited. The chief of Duguri gave us a very cordial invitation to open a school. We could not leave Langtang, nor was there anyone to send on that important errand. We were only able to remain a few days each trip, but every time that chief renewed his request until he almost despaired. Still there was no one to send, and, while the Church at home tarried, Islam was spreading apace. There was already a Moslem school in the capital, and others were being opened in the villages. Should we not once again appeal to the local Church for help? But it was a very difficult sphere, full of pitfalls for the unwary. The strong Mohammedan element and the vile moral atmosphere would prove a great temptation to any inexperienced worker. We felt that there was only one man in the Church who could possibly undertake such a responsible task at that time. He was a man to whom God had led us some years previous while itinerating. He had won many of his tribesmen for Christ, had built the first out-centre, had become an elder, at the call of God had been willing to remove with his wife and family to undertake a very important and self-sacrificing piece

of work in another section of his own tribe. God's seal had been on all his work, and, although it was like taking away a right arm to allow him to leave the Yergum district where he was such a source of strength, we decided, after much prayer, to place the matter before him. It was a great undertaking for this man and his wife, but after prayerful consideration, feeling that this was God's will for them, they again moved on, breaking old associations and ties of kindred to become self-supporting missionaries in another and more needy tribe. The Yergum Christians carried his household goods and supplies of food to his new sphere, gratis, but to this man was left the clearing of a fresh plot of land on which to grow his grain and that meant, with his primitive implements, months of real strenuous work. He spent all his spare time sowing the good seed of the Kingdom throughout the district. God gave the increase, and very speedily a little company of believers gathered. Several of them have learned to read the Scriptures in the Hausa language and come regularly for instruction. As a direct outcome of this native pioneer effort, the Jari Christians have themselves built voluntarily a Prayer hut in a central village, where a very important market is held every week, attended by hundreds of natives representing several tribes. One of the leading men of that village was won for Christ through the preaching of that Yergum farmer-evangelist. He and his household attend the Sunday services conducted by his spiritual father, and throughout the week he acts as leader of this new centre, where services are held daily and instruction given. This should mean much for the spread of the Gospel in that district.

These are some of the things God has wrought through the Langtang Church, first in the Yergum, and then in the Bokiyyûm and Jari tribes to the eastwards.

Away to the south-west there is a small tribe known as the Girkawa. They were noted highway robbers. We had preached there from time to time, and Yergum Christians also visited them, but there seemed no response. One day, as we camped in their midst, four young men

came to us, announced their desire to "follow God," and asked if we could send someone to instruct them. We had to tell them that there was no one to send; but as their homes were close to the Yergum border, and they understood that language, we invited them to come to Langtang for instruction. This they did; two of their number learned to read, and to-day they are witnessing amongst their own people.

Bordering the Yergum to the west is a wild tribe known as the Montol or Tel, who in 1916 murdered a British official and sixty of his native retinue. A punitive expedition was sent, and the area declared "Closed." In 1926, following a favourable report on the work amongst the Yergum by the District Officer, and on his recommendation, the Governor of Nigeria issued a special permit to us to enter and commence Mission work. On our tours of investigation we found them to be very primitive, deeply rooted in their tribal customs and evidently very suspicious of us and all we had to tell them. We were accompanied on these tours by a Yergum Christian interpreter, whose forbears were Montol. He had already done propaganda work amongst these untamed people. Through his instrumentality a Montol has been won and has made public profession of his desire to follow Christ, and now proclaims his new-found faith to his fellows—a Montol preaching to Montols.

Other unoccupied tribes have been visited in company with Yergum Christian carriers, and we were greatly impressed by the urgent need and present opportunity. We hope that soon the Langtang Church will extend its missionary efforts to those regions also. Its strength has been severely taxed, but we believe that self-extension is vital to the life of the Church. "There is that scattereth and yet increaseth."

These local Churches are linked on to others formed by the Sudan United Mission in various tribes. This Mission desires to take part in the formation of an African Church. This union scheme has also received the endorsement of

the Conference of Missionary Societies working in Northern Nigeria.

To meet the present urgent situation in Africa the great factor must be the establishing of a strong self-governing native Church. All service must be permeated by the love of Christ, and as His Kingdom is extended the aim must be, not the propagating of denominations supported by foreign money, but a truly indigenous Church with Christ as its centre and life.

How to Build a Church

CAN you give us some work to enable us to pay our head-tax ? said some Africans to a missionary. Come work in our garden, was the answer. Daily these men worked and earned wages, and daily they attended prayers.

When they had made enough money to pay their head-tax, they said : Now we must return to our people, but we have learned the Way of Life at the daily prayer meetings and would be baptized. They were baptized and went their way.

One day some months afterwards a great crowd came to the missionary's house. The crowd was led by the men who had worked for money to pay their head-tax. These—said the leaders, pointing to the crowd—are the Christians. When we went back to our people, we held daily meetings as you did and many believed, and now we want a Church to be built and hear that Missionary Societies provide Churches for the Christians.

Nay, but—said the missionary—what do you do when the chief is about to marry another wife ?

Oh—said they—we go into the forest and cut down trees, and with much labour we build a house.

Then will you not do the same for the Lord to whom you have now given your hearts ?

Ah—said they—we never thought of that ! Yes, we will, and they did. And thus were the first steps taken in the establishment of an Indigenous Church.—J. ALEXANDER CLARKE.

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"I want to congratulate you on WORLD DOMINION. I have read it from cover to cover with great interest and delight, and the contents should appeal to all laymen."

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